

Coronavirus cases drop, but not enough for schools to reopen

SALEM (AP) — Coronavirus cases in Oregon have declined during the past month, but in order for schools to reopen the average amount of new cases a day needs to decrease from 250 to 60, state health experts said.

In order to reach that goal, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown said residents will have to continue to follow and enforce current state-wide COVID-19 safety mandates or else bars and restaurants may have to close and travel restrictions will be implemented.

“The good news is we’re slowing the spread of COVID. The bad news is our infection rate is still too high for most in-person schools,” Brown said Friday. “With the course we’re on, meeting our goals is just going to take too long. We must do better, faster. We must work together. And we must do it now.”

The Oregon Health Authority reported 259 new cases Friday as the state’s total case count rose to 24,421. The death toll is 414.

Dean Sidelinger, the state’s epidemiologist, said that since July, transmission of the deadly virus has slowed. Hospitalizations also declined last week, from 143 to 115.

The percentage of positive tests has leveled off too — remaining at 5.4 percent.

“While our COVID-19 data shows we are doing better than many other states, the virus continues to be a significant threat in our communities, and we’re not close to keeping the infection rate at a level we’d need to reopen schools across Oregon,” Sidelinger said.

In June, Gov. Brown issued an executive order that allowed in-person learning at public and private K-12 schools only if they met guidance issued by the Oregon Health Authority and Oregon Department of Education.

One of the guidelines requires both a statewide and a county-wide testing positivity rate of five percent or

less, as well as 10 or fewer new cases for every 100,000 people in the county where the school is located.

At the current case rate, Brown said schools would not be able to return for in-person learning until April.

In order to speed up the return of students to schools, Brown said residents will have to strictly follow current statewide mask mandates and gathering limitations.

If cases do not continue to decrease and “at a rapid rate,” Brown said she will have to consider closing bars and restaurants and implementing travel restrictions, which would include people traveling to Oregon from out of state quarantining for two weeks.

Brown said she has been reluctant to order more

businesses to close because of the economic impact. More than 500,000 people in Oregon have filed unemployment claims since the start of the pandemic.

Two counties — Marion and Wasco — were removed from the state’s County Watch List this week after reducing the spread of COVID-19. The watch list is designed to help the state prioritize assistance to areas with the broadest spread of the virus.

When a county is placed on the list, the Oregon Health Authority increases monitoring and provides additional epidemiological support, case investigation and contact tracing help,

officials said.

“This is yet another example of how we can combat this disease by working together,” Brown said.

Oregon Health Authority officials also announced that they had secured supplies to process more than 400,000 COVID-19 specimens tests — increasing the capacity of testing by 20,000 additional tests per week.

“This is an important step toward securing the COVID-19 testing capacity that our state needs,” said Patrick Allen, director of the health authority. “As we’ve said for months, without adequate testing, we cannot truly suppress the virus in our communities.”



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